

# Abstract for MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference 2026 (Basketball Track)

**Title:** *Balanced Duality and Ambidextrous Leadership: Diagnosing and Correcting Playoff Failure in the NBA*

## Introduction

Why do NBA teams that dominate the regular season collapse in the playoffs? The Philadelphia 76ers between 2013 and 2023 provide the clearest case. Despite Joel Embiid's MVP season and consistent top five efficiency ratings, the team never advanced past the second round. Traditional analytics explain what happened but not why. This research introduces the Balanced Duality (B-D) Model, a framework that measures behavioral balance rather than only box scores, and pairs it with Ambidextrous Leadership, a toolkit for managers and coaches to recalibrate those imbalances in real time.

## Methods

We analyzed the Sixers across three organizational phases using quantitative data: records, efficiency ratings, clutch performance, and lineup stability and qualitative coded data from media reports, interviews, and leadership decisions. The B-D Model evaluates individual Levers (Confidence, Learning) and team Dynamics (Collaboration, Exclusivity) on an eleven-point scale. MANOVA and regression modeling tested how balance shifted between regular season and playoffs. Leadership traits such as decisiveness, discipline, and empathy were mapped onto these measures to identify missed opportunities for intervention.

## Results

The Sixers' playoff failures reflected behavioral imbalance that strong regular-season metrics concealed. Confidence often tipped into hubris, leaving the team overly dependent on Embiid as a single point of failure whose injuries dramatically undermined success. Learning stagnated into strategic inertia, reducing the team's ability to adapt during playoff series. Collaboration fractured under stress, while exclusivity generated role friction when integrating stars such as Jimmy Butler and James Harden with role players. Crucially, leadership did not adequately align or manage these behavioral levers and dynamics, allowing imbalances to persist at the moments when stability was most critical. These combined factors explain why the team consistently appeared statistically dominant yet repeatedly underperformed in the postseason.

## Conclusion

Playoff failure is not only tactical, but also behavioral. The B-D Model provides the first replicable metric for playoff resilience, and Ambidextrous Leadership supplies the intervention framework needed to manage it. Together they offer three direct applications: constructing rosters that balance ego with adaptability, monitoring playoff readiness through behavioral dashboards, and equipping leaders to recalibrate teams under pressure. Playoff performance is shaped as much by psychology and leadership as by points and rebounds. This work introduces a behavioral lens that makes those dynamics measurable, showing that the path to championships depends on managing balance under pressure, not only on tracking statistics.

